Contemporary Navajo Baskets on the Utah Reservation Lesson Plan

This lesson plan, made available by the Utah State Historical Society, is designed to involve teachers, students and parents in using the *Utah Historical Quarterly* to learn more about local, state and the nation's history.

An art form long believed to be extinct has re-emerged in the remote region of the Navajo reservation in southeastern Utah. Working from the ancient form and design of ceremonial wedding baskets, a handful of Navajo artists, living in and around Monument Valley, have developed a new style of basket - the Story Basket – that visually depicts ancient Navajo legends and myths. This lesson plan explores the history of Navajo basketry and this new art form.

Curriculum Ties:
Utah Studies, Level 4, Standard 2, Objective 1
Utah Studies, Level 7, Standard 1, Objective 2 and Standard 5, Objective 1
U.S. History I, Level 8, Standard 3, Objective 1

Time Frame:
Activities 1 – 6 and 9 can each be done in one class period or easily combined to fewer class periods. Activities 7 and 8 include students creating their own "baskets" so one class period may be necessary.

Enduring Understanding:
Traditional use and creation of utilitarian and ceremonial baskets by the Navajos was threatened with extinction. The efforts of a few Navajos have not only preserved the traditions but expanded ceremonial baskets into a new contemporary art form.

Essential Questions:
1. What threatened the extinction of the traditional Navajo utilitarian and ceremonial baskets?
2. How were traditional utilitarian and ceremonial baskets used by the Navajos?
3. How were the traditional uses of these baskets saved from extinction?
4. How did the new ceremonial baskets emerge?
5. How are the new ceremonial baskets used to tell traditional Navajo stories?
6. Why is it important that this cultural aspect of the Navajos be preserved?

Materials:
● *Utah Historical Quarterly* (*UHQ*) article**:** "Contemporary Navajo Baskets on the Utah Reservation" by Carol Edison, Summer 2006, Volume 74, Number 3. Available on Utah State History (USH) web site: http://history.utah.gov/ at "History Programs, Teacher Resources, Lesson Plans."

● Enhancement materials, such as photographs, listed as available on "USH web site" also located at: http://history.utah.gov/

● Reproduction of *UHQ* article for educational purposes permission granted.

Additional Useful Materials:
Woven Willow, Goshute Baskets, Grandmothers, and "How It Used To Be" article from *Beehive History 24.* Available on USH website, Enhancement Materials, at http://history.utah.gov/

Background for Teachers:
● Read "Contemporary Navajo Baskets on the Utah Reservation" by Carol Edison, *Utah Historical Quarterly,* Summer 2006, Volume 74, Number 3. Available on USH website at http://history.utah.gov/
● Be familiar with "Contemporary Navajo Baskets" Enhancement Materials on USH web site at http://history.utah.gov/

Student Prior Knowledge: General knowledge of the Navajos.

Intended Learning Outcomes:
1. Students will learn the traditional use of Navajo utilitarian and ceremonial baskets.
2. Students will learn why the traditional use of Navajo utilitarian and ceremonial baskets was threatened with extinction.
3. Students will learn how the traditional use of traditional utilitarian and ceremonial baskets was saved from extinction.
4. Students will learn the way cultural traditions and practices are preserved and perpetuated.
5. Students will learn the importance of artifacts as cultural expressions.
6. Students will learn how Navajo baskets are made.
7. Students will learn how the new ceremonial baskets emerged and what they are today.
8. Students will learn how new ceremonial baskets are used to tell traditional Navajo stories.
9. Students will learn some traditional Navajo stories.
10. Students will reflect on the importance of saving the heritage and crafts of different cultures.

Instructional Procedures:
Engaging students in discovering the beautiful artistry and culture of the Navajos through their Contemporary Story Baskets is easy with this fascinating article and accompanying photographs. Students will reflect on the cultural changes the Industrial Revolution brought to native lands in Activity 1. In Activities 2 and 3 students will learn about traditional American Indian basketry and how this art form was almost lost. Activity 4 gives students an idea of how Navajo baskets are created. Activities 5 and 6 explain how the new tradition of Navajo Story Baskets emerged. Activities 7 and 8 explore these new art forms and the stories that accompany them culminating with students creating their own "baskets." Activity 9 asks students to think how cultures maintain their heritage in nonverbal ways.

Activity 1: Humans Need Containers – Utilitarian Baskets

Step 1: Explain to students that humans have always needed containers to transport and store food, tools, clothing and even infants and in pre-industrial cultures baskets often filled this need. Show students photograph of gathering and winnowing baskets (photograph available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Gathering and Winnowing Baskets").

As the products of the Industrial Revolution reached remote native lands through trading posts traditional gathering, cooking, and storage baskets made from locally gathered materials were gradually replaced with buckets, canteens, plates, cups, and pots made of metal, ceramic, and glass. Some basket forms became scarce and soon began to disappear. In Utah, knowledge of some of these older forms still exists within the Goshute and Navajo Tribes.

Step 2: Ask students what traditional items in our culture have been replaced with new items. Write their answers on the board. [Possible answers: canteen by water bottle, stove by microwave, board games by electronic games, letters by e-mail, phone booths by cell phones, typewriters by computers, televisions with antennas by cable and satellite television, shovels by backhoes, kerosene lamps by electricity, horse and carriage by automobiles.]

Activity 2: Dying Arts

Step 1: Explain to students that as basket production was declining on the Navajo Reservation, other forms of traditional art were on the rise. The same trading posts that brought modern containers to the reservation opened up the outside market to Navajo-made goods, especially the popular wool rugs. Show students a photograph of a Navajo rug (photograph available at USH web site: Enhancement Materials, "Navajo Rug"). Soon the lure of trade goods or cash for rugs led most weavers to focus on rug weaving. Another reason they went to rug making was because the production of ceremonial basketry was governed by formal rules and taboos. But the need for ceremonial baskets remained strong and neighboring Ute and Paiute weavers, not subject to the same taboos as the Navajos, soon produced most of the ceremonial baskets needed by the Navajos. The baskets that were produced were often sold or traded among Navajo patients or medicine men which created a rotation of baskets within communities that required fewer baskets and fewer weavers. At that point, most observers agree that Navajo basketry had basically died out and the well-known red, black, and white Navajo wedding basket was the product of non-Navajo weavers. Show students a photograph of the Navajo Wedding Basket (photograph available at USH web site: Enhancement Materials, "Navajo Wedding Basket") and explain interpretations of this basket (interpretations below).

Interpretations of Navajo Wedding Basket

> There are numerous interpretations for the meaning of the red, black, and white Navajo wedding basket pattern. Some say the white center of the wedding basket portrays either Mother Earth or the beginning of the life; the black stepped terraces either clouds or mountains; and the red circular band either sunrays or a rainbow. The break in the circular pattern, used to orient the basket in the ritually appropriate easterly direction, is sometimes said to symbolize the emergence from the underworld at the time of creation as well as the entrance through which the Holy People come and go. Most agree the design in some way symbolizes the journey through life and many consider the act of weaving a ceremonial basket, from the center outward, to parallel that journey while building harmony and balance between the weaver and her surroundings. Of great ceremonial significance to the Navajo for many generations, this distinctive design is now in much wider use, and has been incorporated into beadwork, textiles, and paintings

both from within and outside the tribe. For many, this design has come to symbolize contemporary Native American identity.

Step 2: Other cultures have suffered the loss of many art forms too. Ask students to think of arts that have died or are threatened. Write their answers on the board and discuss them. [Possible answers: soap making, blacksmithing, sewing own clothes, lace making, darning socks.]

Activity 3: Passing Arts Down Through Generations

Step 1: Explain to students that all Navajo ceremonial baskets merge oral traditions with material culture and create a visual representation and reminder of Navajo values and beliefs. Much of this artistic activity is the product of a cluster of families who have lived for generations atop Douglas Mesa, a relatively isolated area in Monument Valley. Unbeknownst even to some of their northern reservation neighbors, the Bitsinnies, Blacks, Johnsons, and Rocks had quietly continued to make ceremonial baskets long after basketry died out in other parts of the reservation. Perhaps this was because of the abundance of medicine men in this remote and very traditional area or perhaps because basketry materials grow relatively nearby. Whatever the reason, they continued to teach their children to weave ceremonial baskets, preserving an important link between past generations and those living in the twenty-first century.

Additional Useful Materials: Good place to use article: *Woven Willow, Goshute Baskets, Grandmothers, and "How It Used To Be"* (article available at USH website: Enhancement Materials).

Step 2: Ask students what things their family does to teach traditions so traditions and links from past generations are passed down. Write their answers on the board and discuss them. [Possible answers: religious customs, food recipes, music, photographs, family histories, embroidery, crafts, fishing, hunting, gardening.]

See Extension 1 for an activity on passing family traditions through generations.

Activity 4: The Weaving Process

Step 1: Explain to students much of the work and time required to make baskets is spent gathering and preparing the willow or young stalks of sumac that grows near water and are hard to find in the desert. The banks of Utah's Green River have long been a source for local Paiute, Ute, and Navajo weavers. Show students the photograph of a Shoshone weaver harvesting willow (photograph available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Shoshone Weaver Harvesting Willow"). After harvesting, a portion of the willow is split three ways by holding the end of the willow with the teeth while pulling it apart with both hands, producing three thin strips or splints, ready to be trimmed, de-barked and sometimes dyed with vegetable or commercial dyes. Show students the photograph of Sally Black splitting sumac (photograph available at USH web site: Enhancement Materials, "Sally Black, Navajo weaver, splitting sumac").

The actual weaving requires coiling together several un-split willows called rods, to create a shape that spirals outwards, counterclockwise from the center. Then using an awl or ice pick

(photograph of awls available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Awls”) to punch a path through the coiled rods, the weaver inserts the splints of thin, peeled and dyed willow, tightly wrapping them around two layers of rods, moving from the center outwards. Show students photograph of this weaving process (photograph available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Weaving Sumac”) It is this repeated process of binding rods together with strips or splints of willow that produces the basket. Show students a close up view of a basket (photograph available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Close view of basket”).

Activity 5: When Did Basket Designs Change?

Step 1: Explain to students it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when basket weavers in southeastern Utah first began modifying ceremonial baskets by adding figures and other images to the distinctive red, black, and white design. It appears that sometime during the 1950s Ute and Paiute weavers from the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation, in the community of White Mesa just south of Blanding, were doing this. Two decades later, trader William Simpson remembers having seen weavers working on figurative baskets as a young man and began asking local Ute weavers from White Mesa to bring him baskets with those designs. Though most of their baskets continued to feature the traditional ceremonial design in order to meet the needs of the local Navajo market, some weavers included or featured other images, often animals or people, providing baskets for the growing tourist market. Without knowing it, they were taking the first steps in the development of a brand new style of basket that would become recognized throughout the Indian art world and beyond.

In the 1970s the growing Indian art market led some traders to recognize the inherent artistry of traditional baskets and encouraged native weavers to produce baskets that would appeal to buyers beyond the local Navajo market. William Simpson encouraged the Utes to once again include animal and human figures in their baskets. Virginia Smith used photographs of art from other cultures to stimulate Navajo weavers. She showed them prehistoric pottery and rock art from the ancient Anasazi and Mimbres who had lived in the region. She also showed them the current designs from neighboring Apache, Hopi, Paiute, Pima, and Papago (now Tohono O’odham) tribes. A few weavers became interested and began to include these geometric and pictorial images in their work.

During this period, some Navajo weavers also expanded upon tradition by modifying the basic ceremonial design, just like neighboring Ute and Paiute weavers had done before them. They added birds, deer, butterflies, and rabbits to the familiar red, black, and white ceremonial wedding basket, leaving elements of the traditional design next to images of animals and humans. Show students photographs of the modified baskets. Ask them what images they see in each basket and point out how the original wedding design is still included (photographs available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Modified Wedding Baskets”).

Also show students photographs of baskets with deer, butterflies, horses, and rabbits woven into design (photographs available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Animal Baskets”).

Activity 6: A New Tradition Emerges – The Navajo Story Basket

Step 1: Explain to students that sometime during the 1970s Mary Holiday Black embarked on a new direction in her basketry. Show students photographs of Mary Holiday Black (photographs available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Mary Holiday Black"). Encouraged by local traders and stimulated by the reaction of the marketplace, Mary started looking for other ways, closer to home, to further develop her art. An accomplished rug weaver, Mary easily transferred geometric rug designs into her baskets. Then, just as a number of rug weavers had done a few decades earlier, she began incorporating sacred images and designs inspired by the prayers and rituals of medicine men into her work.

Before long, Mary's baskets included representations of the Ye'ii, sacred beings sent by the gods to help and heal the People and keep balance in the world. Show students a photograph of one of these baskets (photograph available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Rainbow Ye'ii Basket"). Though the use of these sacred images made some of her Navajo neighbors in her very traditional area uncomfortable, Mary persisted, trying to alleviate any bad consequences by regularly participating in ceremonies designed to maintain balance with her surroundings. Soon she was not simply weaving symbolic or sacred images, but carefully combining several images that naturally went together to depict traditional stories or ceremonies. The results of her courage and creativity was the development of a totally new contemporary Navajo art form – the Navajo Story Basket.

One of the first baskets to actually tell a story depicted the fire dance, an ancient all-night Navajo ceremony that has not been performed regularly for many years. Show students a photograph of the fire dance basket (photograph available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Fire Dance Basket"). The fire dance was originally part of the lengthy nine day Hail Chant that was designed to demonstrate the power of the medicine man. In the same way that dancers participating in this ceremony alternate throughout the night, the basket features dancers alternating with the flaming sagebrush that lights their way. Perhaps most importantly, through this work of art images an almost extinct Navajo ceremony have been preserved and can be experienced by everyone.

Step 2: Ask students what customs or traditions in other cultures have been preserved through art. [Possible answers: paintings, dances, songs, stories, quilts.]

Activity 7: The New Tradition Grows

Step 1: Explain to students that Mary's courage in using sacred imagery in her work influenced the next generation of weavers which include her four daughters and four of her seven sons. Mary's children, along with other Navajo basket weavers, now weave Navajo Story Baskets that depict many different Navajo stories.

Step 2: Here are several Navajo stories. Photographs of the Navajo Story Baskets and the weavers are available on USH website as indicated. There are different ways to use these stories.

One way is to have the students use the pictures of the baskets while they tell the story. Another way is to read the story to the students and have them act out the stories.

Turkey Basket

According to Navajo legend, the People traveled through four worlds before reaching the world of today. As they emerged from the Fourth World into the Fifth, they fled the flood rising behind them through a reed. As they escaped, each brought along their most important personal treasure. They were anxious to get away, and to contain the water, and were impatient as they waited for Turkey who came through last. When they realized that Turkey was the only one who brought along seeds to help them grow food in their new home, they were both humbled and ashamed. (Photographs of basket and weaver available on USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Turkey Basket" and "Eleanor Cly Rock.")

Placing the Stars Basket

Placing the Stars tells of an incident that took place in the Fifth World when First Man decided to give the people light at night by carefully placing glowing pieces of star-rock in the sky. After he had created the North Star and designed and built several other constellations, First Man was interrupted by Coyote, the trickster, who wanted to help but lacked First Man's patience. Stealing the buckskin bag of mica, Coyote placed three large red stars for himself and then blew the remaining pieces of rock-mica into the nighttime sky, creating the Milky Way, a reminder of the disorder resulting from his impatience. Divided into two parts that represent the opposing forces of night and day and of good and evil, this story basket visually balances Coyote's misdeeds against First Man's good deeds, restoring "hózhó" to the world. Hózhó means balance. (Photographs of basket and weaver available on USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Placing the Stars Basket" and "Peggy Rock Black.")

Separation of the Sexes Basket

This large basket depicts a complex Navajo myth about an argument between the First Man and First Woman that took place in the Fourth World. It tells of a quarrel about who was more important in providing their food. First Man finally got so angry that he moved to the other side of the river, taking all of the men and the Hermaphrodite Twins with him, while Coyote and Big Monster stayed with the women. In the end, First Man and First Woman finally realized they could not get along without each other, apologized, and came together again. The blue river that separated them goes through the middle of the basket while the stalks of corn that were the subject of the argument circle all of the characters. (Photographs of basket and weaver available on USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Separation of the Sexes Basket" and "Agnes Black Gray.")

Changing Bear Woman Basket

This intricate story basket depicts Changing Bear Woman who married Coyote after he killed a giant to win her hand. It illustrates how her brothers, though unhappy to hear of her marriage, agreed to take Coyote hunting with them. But Coyote behaved badly, fighting over a mountain

sheep that one of the brothers had killed. So they sent him home, ahead of them, to deliver the meat. But on the way, Coyote gambled with the Otter People and insulted the Cliff People who caught and killed him. When the brothers returned home without Coyote, his distraught wife used the knowledge he had given her to turn herself into a bear and terrorize those who had killed him. Ultimately, she even killed her brothers, except for the youngest who, prompted by the wind, outran her and destroyed her hidden heart and lungs, the key to her powers. This basket features Coyote and Changing Bear Woman along with her bear image. The big-horned sheep, the otter, the cliff swallows, and the squirrel who tried to protect her vitals from her youngest brother are all there, as well as two Ye'ii, and Small-Wind-and-Knife boy who helped her brother win the fight. All twelve brothers are portrayed in four groups around the edge representing the four sacred mountains that surround Navajo land depicted in the colors of the four sacred directions towards which they fled while trying to escape their sister. (Ye'ii are sacred beings sent by the gods to help and heal the People and keep balance in the world.) (Photographs of the basket and weaver available on USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Changing Bear Woman Basket" and "Sally Black.")

Horned Toad Story Basket

This basket features the horned toad, guardian of the Navajo. The horned toad is believed to chip out arrowheads with his breath and leave them for people to use in protecting themselves. Here a stone toad is attached at the center of the basket, surrounded by arrowheads that are both woven into the basket and attached as three-dimensional stone pieces. The food and water the horned toad needs for sustenance are represented by three corn plants and three broken blue lines. Arrowheads protect him from the dark elongated shapes located just above his tail that represent the evil spirit from the supernatural world. And around the edge of the basket are geometric designs that symbolize lightning and the natural world from which one must also be protected. (Photographs of basket and weaver available on USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Horned Toad Story Basket" and "Lorraine Black.")

Big Monster Basket

Big Monster basket tells of a time before this world when monsters roamed the earth. The monsters, offspring of women who had abused themselves while separated from men during the Fourth World, killed many of the people. Soon afterwards First Man found a female in the form of turquoise, who was the daughter of Mother Earth and Father Sky. She became Changing Woman, the mother of the first four clans of humans and of the courageous Hero Twins – Monster Slayer and Child Born of Water. The father of the Twins, the Sun, gave them weapons to protect themselves from the monsters as they fought to make the world safe once again. He provided rainbows for them to walk on, lightning bolts for arrows and flint knives, and armor for protections. Big Monster, who lived in the south on Mount Taylor was one of the most powerful foes and the first monster the Twins encountered and conquered. Most Navajos would consider it very risky to reproduce this image of extreme evil and visually tell this story. As a result, Jenny Rock has woven a circle of protective flint arrowheads around the basket's outside edge. They help tell of Big Monster's demise while enclosing his dangerous image and balancing his inherent evil with the protective power of goodness. (Photograph of basket available on USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Big Monster Basket.")

Sand Painting Story Basket

As part of religious and cultural rituals, Navajo medicine men create colorful sand paintings by carefully pouring sand on the ground to make designs of sacred images that express Navajo beliefs. Ceremonies are conducted to heal someone who is ill, whether physically, mentally or spiritually, by restoring what is known as "hózhó," or balance, between the patient and his or her surroundings. As a result, sand paintings must be extremely precise and balanced so that harmony can return. Lorraine Black's basket displays a variety of carefully balanced sacred images taken from sand paintings. In the center of the basket are the eyes and mouth of the sun representing the origin of life, carefully flanked by two Ye'ii, two sacred plants, four sets of eagle feathers that function as messengers between the worlds, and four rainbows that provide protection. Ye'ii are sacred beings sent by the gods to help and heal the People and keep balance in the world. (Photographs of basket and weaver available on USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Sand Painting Story Basket" and "Lorraine Black.")

Step 2: Have students draw a story from their culture about a legend, belief, ceremony or historic event. Stories could be drawn on round pieces of paper to simulate a basket. Students could share their "basket" and story with the class.

Activity 8: Baskets Today

Step 1: Explain to students today weavers continue to produce story baskets that depict specific legends, beliefs or ceremonies. Some patterns like the "Changing Bear Woman," "Separation of the Sexes" or the widely woven "Placing the Stars" have achieved classic status. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the development of contemporary Navajo basketry is that the experimentation and creativity of the 1970s continues and there appears to be unending room for self-expression with baskets. Today the dozen or so artists, for whom weaving is almost a full-time career, are producing some of the most beautiful baskets yet.

Step 2: Illustrating this new creativity are the Abstract Baskets, Illusionary Baskets, and Collage Baskets. Show example of each basket type while explaining about it. Photographs of the baskets are available on USH website as indicated.

Abstract Baskets

Nowhere is this creativity more evident than in the growing number of baskets that have moved from pictorial imagery to the abstract. Once again, Mary Holiday Black took the lead. In her "Home of the Butterflies Basket" she changes the colorful images of butterflies into abstract forms that result in a much stronger visual statement that expresses the beauty of butterflies being liberated through an act of violence. (Photograph of basket available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, "Home of the Butterflies Basket.")

Among the strongest of Elsie Holiday's many versions of "Changing Bear Woman" are those in which she has abstracted the face, suggesting the complexity inherent in this mythological character. See Elsie Holiday and her "Changing Woman Basket." (Photographs of Elsie Holiday

and basket available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Elsie Holiday” and “Changing Woman Basket.”)

Abstraction is also basic to Joann Johnson’s non-pictorial, geometric designs that explore color and form in much the same was as the American color field painters of the 1950s and 60s. See her “Fields of Color Basket.” (Photograph of basket available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Fields of Color Basket.”)

Illusionary Baskets

Kee Bitsinnie creates illusionary baskets whose intricate geometric patterns function like the “eye-dazzler” designs of earlier rug weavers. (Photographs of Kee Bitsinnie and one of his illusionary baskets available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Kee Bitsinnie” and “Illusionary Basket.”)

Collage Baskets

Peggy Rock Black and Lorraine Black weave “collages” that creatively bring together multiple, sometimes unexpected, images to make a more personal interpretation of some aspect of Navajo belief or culture. (Photographs of collage baskets available at USH website: Enhancement Materials, “Peggy Rock Black Collage Basket” and “Lorraine Black’s 2002 Winter Olympic Collage Basket.”)

Step 3: Have a discussion about these new types of baskets. Ask students what they think of these new styles. Do they like or dislike them? Why? Do they have any concerns with these new basket styles vs. the traditional basket styles? What are their concerns? Do they think there could be a danger of traditional basket styles being lost?

Step 4: Have students create one type of the new baskets (Abstract, Illusionary, or Collage). Baskets could be drawn on round pieces of paper to simulate a basket. Students could share their “basket” and what their inspiration for the basket was with the class.

Activity 9: The Future

The rebirth of Navajo basketry on Douglas Mesa during the last twenty years and the development of the Navajo Story Basket have contributed to the preservation and perpetuation of both Navajo stories and Navajo craft. Through basketry these artists are helping the younger generation regain and maintain their heritage by crafting visual reminders of cultural values, beliefs, and concerns. By weaving story baskets that incorporate elements of traditional belief and legend into masterpieces of visual storytelling, contemporary Navajo basket weavers are also sharing the essence of their unique culture with the rest of the world. It is exciting to guess about what might develop as the next generation of weavers and this wonderful art form continue to grow.

Step 1: Share with students the concept of how Navajo baskets help maintain Navajo heritage to younger generations (from above paragraph). Discuss with them what their culture does to

maintain their heritage for younger generations. Have students share any experiences where they felt like they learned something about their heritage, culture or beliefs from something other than being told about it.

Extensions

Extension 1:

Follow up with the discussion in Activity 3 on passing traditions and links down through generations by having the students bring family recipes to class. Have each student write the story of how their recipe has been passed down in their family. Collect the stories and recipes and make a class heritage recipe book.